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AUTHOR Hanning, Eileen
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ABSTRACT

Educational and developmental researchers suggest that children who have experienced homelessness suffer both in self-esteem and in literacy development, although early research is not complete. The Reading Connection (TRC), a community-based nonprofit organization in northern Virginia, focuses on the social aspect of reading, rather than portraying it as simply a matter of decoding. Once a week volunteers visit shelters, read aloud with children, and conduct reading-related activities or crafts. Over the years, TRC has developed partnerships with the shelters it serves. TRC and First Book, another children's literacy organization, recently joined forces to create a book club that provides recently homeless families with a monthly package containing two books for each child, literacy tips and activities, and an order form, book list, and self-addressed stamped envelope. Both the shelter-based program and the book club have faced some challenges during their implementation. Areas in which TRC can increase its practical application of literacy research include focusing on parents, writing, and various cultural traditions that include oral language. Lessons and ideas that can be taken from this model to support literacy development in homeless children globally include: homeless families need encouragement to draw on their oral language traditions to bolster oral language development; and the presence and availability of reading materials are essential for children's continued literacy development. By investing in the literacy development of homeless children and families, such programs can help homeless children and families can experience both success during and after the crisis of homelessness. (Contains eight references.) (RS)

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THE READING CONNECTION: LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND HOMELESS CHILDREN

by Eileen Hanning

Graduate Student, Trinity College, Washington, D.C.
Assistant Program Director for The Reading Connection

3240 Wilson Boulevard
Suite 230
Arlington, VA 22201

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INTRODUCTION

The growing problem of homelessness affects more and more children. Homelessness is not just a domestic issue with implications for social welfare and housing, but also a global issue. Organizations such as the International Committee for the Red Cross and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees work all over the world to help families who find themselves without permanent housing. Whatever the cause of homelessness---war, lack of affordable housing, or domestic violence---the chaos associated with it threatens family stability and child development. Educators find that children experiencing homelessness often miss important language and literacy development. Interruption of literacy development and strained family relationships can have drastic implications for later learning.

As communities begin to address the issue of homelessness, either globally and locally, they find that more than just food and shelter are necessary to help children survive this experience. Providing literacy support for homeless families can help children overcome the crisis, and avoid the lingering burdens of homelessness. In Northern Virginia, a local nonprofit organization has developed innovative programs to provide that support by making available books and literacy experiences to homeless and recently homeless families.

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This paper begins by reviewing the situation faced by homeless families in the United States. Educational and developmental researchers suggest that children who have experienced homelessness suffer both in self-esteem and in literacy development, although early research is not complete. The second part of this paper describes a model of intervention that is designed to support and encourage literacy development among children whose families are or recently have been homeless. The conclusion places this model in a global context, discussing the broader implications

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of providing literacy support services for homeless families.

THEORY AND RESEARCH

Homelessness

In 1995, the United States Conference of Mayors reported that families with children comprise 36.5% of the homeless population and that children alone account for 25% of the homeless population. In 1993, more than half of the homeless children were under the age of five. New York City alone experienced a 500% increase in the number of homeless families between 1980 and 1990 (Nunez 1994: 29). Seventy-one percent of the cities surveyed by the United States Conference of Mayors reported an increase in requests for shelter during 1995. Overall, requests for shelter by homeless families increased by 15% last year. In more than half of the cities surveyed, families may have to break up to be sheltered. For children in the United States, the threat of homelessness continues to grow and the services to support them are struggling to keep up.

Common sense and observation tell us that children experiencing homelessness are subject to all the risk factors associated with poverty plus the stresses that are specifically related to homelessness: transience, lack of privacy, chaos, and missed learning opportunities at home or at school. The combination of factors associated with poverty---such as hunger, lack of access to early childhood education, low maternal education levels, and single-parent status---put homeless children at risk for school failure and hampered literacy development. Their personal lives can become unstable and often terrifying which in turn can strain their self-esteem and family relationships.

Nevertheless, scholars have yet to conduct extensive research to document the effects of homelessness on children. Early studies and surveys offer conflicting information. Their weaknesses suggest the need to isolate homelessness from other poverty-related factors for further study. They also demonstrate the difficulty in studying this highly mobile and often invisible population.

For example, one recent study has shown that homelessness alone is not a significant predictor of developmental delay or psychological function. But poverty itself is a significant predictor (Schteingart 1995). However, the same study showed that the presence of an additional caregiver from the mother's immediate family, and participation in an early childhood education program, supported improved development. In addition, the researcher points out that the control (housed) group was "*far more precariously housed* . . . than the random sample of public assistance families" and may not have been a representative sample (ibid., 330) (emphasis added). She goes on to state:

> The results of our study should not be taken to mean that homelessness is inconsequential. Rather, the results point to the profound toll that poverty takes (ibid.).

Data collected by Homes for the Homeless (HFH), in a 1992 study comparing New York City's non-homeless children to homeless children of similar ages served by HFH, indicated that a homeless child is eight times more likely to repeat a grade, three times more likely to be placed in special education classes, and twice as likely to score lower on standardized achievement tests than a non-homeless child (Nunez 1994:58). School-aged children are not the only ones whose learning suffers. Homeless infants and preschoolers often experience cognitive and physical developmental delays, especially in the areas of language development and social skills.

Self-esteem

Recent research on the effects of homelessness on children suggests that they suffer damage to their self-esteem. Society's attitudes toward homeless children tend to categorize them as victims, delinquents, or people to be ignored (Stronge and Tenhouse 1990:17). The stigma associated with homelessness can have powerful negative effects on self-esteem for children as well as adults. In addition, homelessness can strain family relationships and limit the availability of parents for nurturing (due to their struggle to provide for their families); this too can influence children's

sense of worth. Finally, homeless children may suffer academically because they miss school, change schools several times in a school year, or get inadequate rest and nutrition. This can reduce self-esteem as well.

William Purkey began exploring the reciprocal nature of academic achievement and self-esteem in the 1960's. Since then, research has repeatedly shown a connection between a student's selfimage and her academic achievement. Both self-concept regarding academic ability and general personal self-image affect school performance. School performance, in turn, affects self-image. Purkey identifies key factors that help create atmospheres conducive to developing positive self-image: challenge, freedom, respect, warmth, control, and success (Purkey 1970:5056). More recent research, based on services provided to homeless children, supports Purkey's assertions and points to the need for specific emphasis on building self-esteem in programs serving homeless children (Root 1990, Stronge and Tenhouse 1990).

Literacy Development

In the absence of data documenting the effect of homelessness on a child's literacy development, service providers should refer generally to research on literacy development, and should particularly look to studies on literacy and poverty. They should also look to successful programs serving homeless children for guidance.

Reading research points to oral language as the foundation for literacy. Theories of emergent literacy indicate that children construct their understanding of the written word based on their oral language skills and their background knowledge of the world around them. Access to books is essential, but so is interaction with and about books. Literacy is an inherently social act; talk is its foundation.

Oral language provides a way for able readers to support or scaffold, to use Vygotsky's term, literacy learning for children who have not yet learned to read alone (pre-readers). Reading aloud to pre-readers allows them to experience written language, story patterns, different vocabulary, and the nature of books. It encourages them to begin constructing their knowledge about books and reading before they learn to read.

Some research indicates that the home literacy environment is a stronger predictor of later literacy even than socioeconomic status (Purcell-Gates 1995 and Dickinson 1994). Children growing up in families that value and enjoy reading, and that have access to a variety of reading materials, become stronger readers than those without such familial support. Access to books and other reading materials, combined with the presence of literacy role models, are key to literacy development.

Dickinson's collection of articles about children's and family literacy programs, *Bridges to Literacy*, provides examples of literacy research in action. Each program described was based on an aspect of literacy research such as the important role of talk (about books and everything else), reading together, interaction in small groups, or the home environment (Dickinson 1994). Catherine Snow points out common themes in programs described in *Bridges to Literacy* in her commentary. All of the programs emphasized the important role that parents and teachers play in helping children learn, the emphasis on high quality children's books, the affective "fun" element of literacy, the fact that reading is a social activity, and the primary role of talk. Family literacy becomes more important as we come to understand the impact of environment and role models on literacy development. Because language and literacy learning depend on so many factors, it is difficult to single out a single all-important one. This complexity points to the need to help families recreate optimal learning environments. Homelessness obviously presents some serious challenges to this endeavor.

Homes For the Homeless programs that serve children focus not on remediation, but on educational opportunity, acceleration and enrichment. Their programs include comprehensive early childhood services that focus on physical, cognitive, and social development, as well as parent involvement. Their Brownstone School, for school-aged children, provides challenging opportunities for educational enrichment. HFH programs reflect a constructivist point of view rather than an approach aimed at deficit remediation. They are based upon the natural, preexisting curiosities and interests of the children, and they build on those opportunities for learning. HFH's early childhood and Brownstone School programs have been quite successful in giving children who are experiencing homelessness the support and opportunities they need to keep growing and learning. The early childhood program cites dramatic improvement in language skills, and the Brownstone School children show improved scores in reading, math, science, and school attendance.

If we know that oral language development is a keystone to literacy and that the home environment influences literacy development, then the importance of intervention for children experiencing homelessness should be obvious. Involving homeless families in literacy building programs is possible in several ways. Shelter settings provide a variety of opportunities to encourage literacy development in children and families. Programs focusing on oral language development for young children and general literacy habits can support literacy development in children and families. By creating print-rich environments in shelters and providing opportunities to talk with others about books and to see literacy role models, we can support the development of literacy among children experiencing homelessness. If we extend this support to families moving to transitional housing, we can help families create print-rich, literate environments in their new homes as well.

MODEL

Practical strategies employed to support literacy habits and development for homeless children and families include providing access to literacy material, opportunities for book ownership, experiences with books, and guidance for parents to support their children's literacy development. The Reading Connection, a community-based nonprofit organization, strives to implement these strategies to support families and children experiencing homelessness in Northern Virginia. Its programs focus on the social aspect of reading, rather than portraying it as simply a matter of decoding. The pleasure of sharing books and stories with others is both the keystone and the springboard for their programs, which are provided in shelters as well as to families in transition.

Shelter-based Program

Founded in 1989 by local educators as an outreach project of the Greater Washington Reading Council, The Reading Connection (TRC) was created to help bring books and reading into the lives of children living in area shelters. By 1993 it became an independent nonprofit organization with help from volunteers, local foundations, and Reading Is Fundamental, a national children's literacy organization. Since 1992 The Reading Connection has served more than 1,200 children in six shelters in northern Virginia. The demographics of people served show that roughly two-thirds are people of color.

TRC's shelter-based program has three components:

- experience with books,
- ownership of books, and
- access to books.

Once a week volunteers visit shelters, read aloud with children, and conduct reading-related activities or crafts. The read-aloud sessions provide positive, relaxed, and fun experiences with books. While the children sometimes read to the volunteer or to each other, emphasis is not placed on skills or mechanics but on the pleasure of reading together. Parents are always invited to participate in read-aloud sessions. Volunteers usually read one on one or to small groups. When parents join in, they read with their own children or to small groups. While sometimes hectic, read-aloud sessions are usually quiet times with a great deal of interaction and warmth.

When each child enters the shelter she or he receives a welcome bag or box with new, age-appropriate books and supplies such as paper, pencils, crayons, tape, and scissors. Babies receive board books and hand-sewn bibs and dolls. During weekly read-aloud sessions children are also encouraged to choose a new book to keep. In addition to personal ownership of books, TRC provides continuous access to books in shelters by creating reading corners, or small

libraries, within each shelter.

Teams of volunteers conduct the program at each shelter and are free to add elements to the three core components to meet the particular needs or interests of families served. Some read-aloud teams bring snacks for the children and some conduct informational meetings for parents. Some sites provide welcome bags and reading materials for parents. One site takes families to the public library once a month to get library cards and to take a tour. One site has two read-aloud sessions per week, one for preschool-aged children and one for older children.

Volunteers also coordinate special events, assemble craft materials, sew welcome bags, bibs, and puppets, and coordinate community support and donations. Initially, most read-aloud volunteers were teachers or librarians, but as the volunteer pool has grown, TRC has also begun to provide training for readers without experience reading to children. Since 1992, more than one thousand individuals have volunteered in some capacity for The Reading Connection.

Over the years TRC has developed partnerships with the shelters it serves. Shelter staff inform families about the program upon their arrival; they also continue to work with TRC volunteer teams to create and maintain reading corners and to help gather children together for weekly read-aloud sessions. Shelters see TRC's program as supporting their efforts to help families through the crisis of homelessness in several ways. Positive experiences with books build children's self-esteem, reinforce their language use and development, provide a brief escape from the stress associated with homelessness, and strengthen personal relationships. In addition, information for parents about reading with their children reinforces shelter program efforts designed to strengthen or develop parenting skills.

Transitional Program

Most of the shelters TRC serves house clients on a short-term basis. Clients can stay from three weeks to eighteen months depending on the site. The ultimate goal, of course, is for families to move to independent housing, although they may move from emergency shelters or safe houses to shelters with long-term capacity before they move out on their own. While the average length of stay in a homeless shelter in the United States is sixty to ninety days, it takes most families much longer to overcome the crisis and achieve a stable, secure lifestyle again. With this in mind, The Reading Connection and First Book, another children's literacy organization, recently joined forces to create a book club that provides recently homeless children with free books and access to reading experiences for up to one year after leaving the shelter.

The book club was designed as a natural extension of what a child experienced with the Reading Connection while in the shelter. By extending reading experiences and opportunities beyond the shelter, the book club:

- provides some stability and continuity for the child in transition,
- provides age-appropriate books for personal ownership,
- places reading in the new home, and encourages development of family reading habits,
- motivates children to read by providing new books, encouraging parental involvement, arranging special events, and offering opportunities to interact with other children about books, and
- provides support and guidance for parents to encourage involvement with their children in the context of reading.

Creating a book club where children receive books every month, parents receive support and encouragement to read with their children, and children may participate in special reading events, is an important element in integrating family

reading habits into daily routine. *Free* books are essential because a formerly homeless family may not have disposable income to spend on books or on transportation to the library. For up to a year after the family leaves the shelter, The Reading Connection Book Club sends books to participating children to help them build personal libraries and develop a sense of themselves as readers. Beyond facilitating access to and ownership of books, the book club places emphasis on a variety of literacy activities and resources through additional materials provided in each book package.

For the book club pilot project, TRC focused on three organizations where it conducts a shelter-based program. TRC chose two shelters that provide formal follow-through support services for their clients as they leave for permanent housing. The Arlington County Temporary Shelter (TACTS) and the Arlington-Alexandria Coalition for the Homeless "Adopt-A-Family" program added the book club to the extensive support services they offer families as part of their follow-through programs. Both organizations have included the book club on the agenda of regularly scheduled follow-through meetings so that TRC could introduce the book club and enroll clients. Both organizations asked their case workers to give enrollment materials to clients who were unable to attend the meetings, allowing them to enroll by mail. TRC also included a third shelter site, one without a formal follow-through program, to assess the viability of maintaining long-term book club participation without the benefit of an outside program. Alive! House clients moving to permanent housing are invited to enroll in the book club by shelter staff during exit interviews. Although Alive! House does not provide formal long-term follow-through services, they do maintain contact and offer support in an informal way.

Working with established support systems benefits both the book club and the support programs. The book club enhances the services that shelters provide for families in transition by providing books---which in turn can support success at school for children and can give families opportunities to relax and learn together---and by providing information for parents about children and reading. TACTS, Adopt-A-Family, and Alive! House ease book club interaction with clients by helping with enrollment and communication; they also help TRC keep mailing addresses current.

As members of the book club, families receive a monthly package, containing two books for each child, literacy tips and activities, and an order form, book list, and self-addressed stamped envelope. Parents or children select the books for their next shipment and return the order form to TRC. First Book then purchases the books with grant money and volunteers assemble packages and mail them out to families. Once every two to three months TRC and First Book representatives meet with families at follow-through meetings to enroll new members and get feedback from current members. Additional books or writing materials are made available to families at these meetings. For example, at a December meeting, the book club provided books for mothers to select to give to their children as Christmas presents. Sometimes parents choose the books; sometimes the children do. Occasionally at meetings or in the book ordering process, books are made available for parents as well.

An important component of the book club is the supplemental materials enclosed in each package. TRC designed materials to help families think about the literacy acts they engage in every day, beyond just reading books. Materials developed around themes such as cooking, weather, television, or music, include tips about reading environmental text and capitalizing on everyday events to help children feel like readers and writers. The materials emphasize the value of writing notes, recipes, or letters; reading directions, schedules, labels, and signs; and talking about anything. Suggestions sometimes include recommended ages to help parents know what their three-year old would enjoy, as opposed to their eight-year old. Materials always include a reading log, a page or two of reading-related tips or ideas, and related supplies (such as blank recipe cards) if necessary. Reading logs encourage children to read and reinforce their self-image as readers. Information for parents about reading with children is provided through materials written by Reading Is Fundamental and through other reading and parenting resources.

The supplemental information provides essential support for reading in the home. While the shelter-based program relies on volunteers to initiate and conduct reading-related activities, the book club leaves it up to families in their own homes. Not only do the supplemental materials provide ideas and suggestions for literacy activities, they remind families that many things they do every day are important literacy tasks. In short, the materials remind them they are readers.

Also included in the plan for the book club are special events where member families can gather for a party with storytellers or visit a local bookstore. The book club also periodically sends a newsletter to families to tell them how the

club is growing and to provide information about literacy resources in the community, such as library programs and story hours.

Families are continually invited to make comments or suggestions. Every book order form contains space to make comments. In addition, families are encouraged to call TRC with any comments, questions, or ideas, and parents and children are both encouraged to submit comments, questions, book reviews, or reading tips for the newsletter. The program was introduced to parents as a pilot; they were told that their participation and feedback would shape the eventual design of the program. So far feedback has been very positive about both books and materials. Families have also contacted TRC to request special books for children (an autistic child responds well to books that make sounds or have lights) or to check on the status of their orders. Formal evaluation by families and participating organizations will include discussions at meetings, written surveys, and interviews.

The pilot program for the book club began in October 1995. Currently thirty-four families are members with a total of eighty-six children. Almost all enrollment and interaction so far has been done by mothers. TRC lacks exact information about whether fathers are present, although in most cases it appears they are not. Demographics of the group are approximately 70 percent people of color, 18 percent European American, and 11 percent unidentified. TRC has enrolled nineteen families from Adopt-A-Family, fourteen families from TACTS, and one family from Alive! House. Twenty-six families enrolled at meetings, eight by mail.

The book club pilot is funded by a grant from the Fowler Foundation. The grant covers costs of purchasing books and mailing them, developing and copying materials, and obtaining supplies. Donations from the community provide literacy-related materials and incentives for parents such as paper, crayons, calendars, and pens. Volunteers provide the "people power" to mail packages, maintain records, and read with children at follow-through meetings.

Challenges

Both the shelter-based program and the book club have faced some challenges during their implementation. Now that the shelter-based program is well established, the challenges facing it are largely programmatic. Meeting these challenges will result in strengthening and deepening the program. While the quality of volunteers is excellent, and the turnover rate is very low, more male and minority volunteers are needed. Following a formal evaluation, the shelter-based program strengthened its relationship with shelters and has begun trying to involve parents more by providing adult reading materials, introductory meetings, and workshops on reading with children for shelter-run parenting classes.

Because the book club is so new, most of its challenges are still logistical. The main obstacle for the book club has been getting books from publishers in a timely fashion. Delays in shipping and unavailability of books have prevented packages from going out on as scheduled. Inclement weather has also caused the cancellation or rescheduling of follow-through meetings and delays in package delivery. Communication with families is also a challenge. Most communication occurs through the mail which adds lag time to the club's ability to respond. TRC also lacks information regarding the literacy levels of parents. While most parents seem to participate with ease, it is possible that they struggle with the ordering process or with reading with their children. When TRC asked Adopt-A-Family, TACTS, and Alive! about parent literacy levels, these service providers either lacked the information themselves or indicated simply that parental literacy would be adequate to participate.

Ongoing challenges for both the shelter-based program and the transitional program include evaluation and funding. Because both of the programs were designed as community service programs and not as research studies, evaluation tends to be anecdotal and qualitative, focusing on affective results. TRC has neither created nor sought a specific control group against which to measure its results, nor does it conduct skills testing to measure any collateral gains in reading ability. TRC's desire to respect the privacy and confidentiality of the families involved limits in some ways the design and extent of possible evaluation. However, feedback from participants, volunteers, and shelter staff has shown a high degree of satisfaction with the program and helps TRC continually improve and innovate to better serve its clients. The search for funding is also a continual process that includes applying for grants from foundations, participating in the United Way Campaign, and asking local businesses and community groups for their support. TRC has not sought any funding from local, state, or national governments due to the complexity of applying for and complying with government grants and TRC's desire to remain a grassroots, community-supported organization.

TRC's community-based programs serve homeless and transitional children and families in a unique and meaningful way. This organization strives to enhance the quality of life and to support literacy learning for children experiencing homelessness by providing access to books and opportunities for warm, relaxed interaction about books. Through its programs, TRC aims to foster a love of reading, strengthen family ties, build self-esteem and self-image as readers, and enhance oral language development and literacy skills.

THEORY AND PRACTICE TOGETHER

TRC's programs are based on the simple premise that reading aloud with children and providing them with books of their own supports their literacy development during the crisis of homelessness. Those programs capitalize on some of the most current research regarding literacy learning. Reading corners and books mailed directly to families in transition help create print-rich environments. Read-aloud sessions, small group activities, and tips for parents on reading with their children foster oral language development. Literacy habits modeled for children by volunteers or parents help them see what readers look like and that reading can be a pleasure. Book ownership and book-related crafts and activities help children see themselves as readers and extend their experiences with books into their everyday lives.

Positive experiences with books and reading support children's efforts at school and provide opportunities to feel successful. Bolstering self-esteem and strengthening bonds between family members through sharing books is one way to help children through the emotional strain experienced during homelessness. Purkey emphasizes the importance of freedom to make choices, honest opportunities for success, and an atmosphere of warmth as key elements for the development of self-esteem (Purkey 1970: 5056). Both the shelter-based and transitional programs provide regular opportunities for children to choose books to keep. Reading aloud, discussing stories, and book-related activities in the shelter-based program constitute honest opportunities for success with books and reading. Reading tips and ideas provided in the book club emphasize the rich array of authentic literacy tasks that families conduct daily. By drawing attention to everyday activities that involve reading, writing, talking, listening, and thinking, the book club program reinforces families' impressions of themselves as readers. Finally, the warm, relaxed, inviting atmosphere created by reading together as a family or in small groups at the shelter provides not only a break from stress, but also creates a context in which self-image and family bonds can be strengthened.

Areas in which TRC can increase its practical application of literacy research include focusing on parents, writing, and various cultural traditions that include oral language. Research shows the value of parents reading with their children. To further act on this finding, TRC could conduct more workshops to help parents learn read-aloud skills. Effective workshops would combine discussion, role playing, and opportunities to practice read-aloud skills. One result of these workshops might be that parents would conduct read-aloud sessions in shelters in the absence of TRC volunteers. TRC could also collaborate with adult literacy programs for parents in order to provide simultaneous literacy support for their children. Another opportunity for parental involvement might include inviting parents to become TRC volunteers, to act as liaisons between parents at shelters or in the book club and TRC, to serve on committees, or join the board of directors. While participation at this level may not be possible for parents at the height of their battle with homelessness, parents in transition or who have graduated from follow-through programs may be able to participate. Input from parents who have experienced both homelessness and TRC programs could greatly enhance the organization's ability to serve this population.

While the focus of TRC programs is mainly reading and oral language development, writing is also a crucial component of literacy. TRC provides participating children with paper, blank books, and pencils, pens and crayons, but it has no formal program component to encourage writing. The book club asks for written comments from parents and children regarding the program and book reviews by children, but this has yet to prompt any writing by children. TRC programs could seek to increase writing by including story writing or letter writing initiatives, encouraging children to write or dictate captions to their art work, journal writing prompts, and encouraging families to write their family histories together.

Finally, focusing on oral language development, TRC could increase its efforts by building on the various oral language

traditions of the ethnic groups represented in the population it serves. Storytelling and singing are two ways in which TRC could enhance its emphasis on the importance of oral language. Special events with guest storytellers or folk musicians, or inclusion of children's books on the topic, are possible ways to focus on this element. Including a component on storytelling in current workshops is another.

Literacy research supports each of these paths of program enhancement to strengthen TRC's programs overall. Finding practical ways to help children become avid readers in spite of homelessness is the ultimate goal of TRC. By enlisting the support of the community as a whole, collaborating with other service providers, and working from a sound research base, TRC provides a unique and much-needed service to homeless children and families.

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS: FOCUS ON LITERACY

The TRC model is effective in large suburban community. What lessons and ideas can we take from this model to support literacy development in homeless children globally?

The first and simplest approach is to encourage homeless families to draw on their oral language traditions to bolster oral language development in their children. Storytelling, singing, reciting poetry, and praying all involve oral language and draw on the cultural traditions of the families involved. Not only will they foster oral language development, these methods can also convey cultural and historical links and foster family bonds. This approach is highly portable and free.

A second implication is the need for reading material in crisis settings. Especially where refugees spend extended periods of time in camps, the presence and availability of books and reading materials are essential for the continued literacy development of the children. Needs go beyond blankets, food, and shelter. In the United States, Reading Is Fundamental conducts a program, called Project Open Book, that provides books for children in crisis settings such as homeless shelters, safe houses, hospitals, and juvenile detention centers. Supported by donations from the publishing community, Reading Is Fundamental's Project Open Book provides children's books to qualifying service providers for a fraction of the total cost of shipping. The cost of purchasing, storing, and shipping books can be prohibitive, but by working with publishers and book distributors to provide free materials and services, it becomes possible to serve homeless families at no cost to them.

Third, relief and social service workers can use books to help families strengthen relationships and survive the crisis of homelessness. Books not only provide an escape from the stresses of homelessness, but also act as springboards for discussion of feelings and concerns. The warmth and relaxation associated with reading together can build self-esteem and family bonds.

Finally, by providing information and support for parents regarding their child's literacy development and their role as their child's most important teacher, service providers can enhance parenting skills and foster literacy development for children during and after homelessness. Teaching a group of parents about reading aloud with their children, choosing books for their children, and generally supporting their children's literacy growth and then having them teach their peers is an effective way to reach families at risk. Parents may feel more comfortable talking with peers about their families than with an educator or social service provider. This approach allows parents not only to be involved with a program for their children, but to help conduct it. It also reduces costs to service providers by decreasing the number of staff or non-parent volunteers needed to conduct the program.

CONCLUSION

As homelessness continues to grow both domestically and internationally, we will see an even greater impact on large numbers of children. Only by intervening while families are still experiencing homelessness and as they make the transition to a stable, housed lifestyle can we hope to ameliorate damage to literacy development. If we continue to

provide only food and shelter for homeless families, we foster a generation of children poised to experience continued poverty and crisis exacerbated by under-developed literacy skills and failure at school. The alternative is simple and reasonable. By investing in the literacy development of homeless children and families, we can help them experience success both during and after the crisis of homelessness.

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